The Monstrous Birth of Alexander the Great:

Thomas of Kent's *Roman de toute chevalerie* and Twelfth-Century Natural Science

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The twelfth century, that period of intellectual flowering in western Europe, has left us more than one tale of seduction by erudition. Abelard's lessons to Heloise are famous; the undertaking was, by Abelard's own admission, easy because her uncle was anxious to find her a teacher and the lovers could exchange amatory notes.[1] Almost effaced from literary history is another tale, an Anglo-Norman version of the Alexander the Great story in which the Egyptian mage Nectanabus seduces Olympias, the queen of Macedonia, a liaison that produces Alexander. The situation is different from Abelard and Heloise, for Olympias has no reputation for enjoying lessons. But Nectanabus draws out a set of jeweled tablets that represent the course of the heavens and gives the lady a lesson in astrology, eliciting her curiosity and wonderment. Thus this text, Thomas de Kent's *Roman de toute chevalerie* (ca. 1175), which closely follows Latin accounts of Alexander's birth, conflates eroticism, marvels, and cosmic determinism at the moment of conception of the legendary Alexander, and it highlights the learned discourses of astronomy and paradoxography (the writing of marvels) that had contributed so much to the Alexander material.[2] After all, the great king had eyes of two different colors, rode a horse called Bucephalus that may or may not have been a chimera, killed his mage-father, and conquered the known world, encountering the marvelous races that populated its far edges, before being cut down in his prime by an assassination that the stars had foretold. Several

decades before Robert de Boron brought the figure of the worker of wonders into vernacular treatments of the *matière de Bretagne* in the form of Merlin, Thomas de Kent described an astrologer and worker of wonders who paid for his expertise with his life.[3] This is, then, an early vernacular text that grapples with the complex implications of what it means to understand nature.

The account of Alexander's birth sets Thomas's version apart from the versions in the Gallo-Romance languages already circulating on the Continent. These texts testify indirectly that their authors were ill equipped to cope with a narrative material that reached out toward so many branches of learning and modes of understanding the natural world, though we know little about the individuals in question. Of the very first, Auberi de Besançon, who wrote an octosyllabic version in Francoprovençal sometime in the first half of the twelfth century, one can say only that he read Latin, had access to the relevant histories, and was perhaps a canon.[4] We know nothing at all of the unnamed author of the decasyllabic Poitevin version, which dates to about 1160.[5] The most successful author, Alexandre de Paris (also known as Alexandre de Bernay), who wrote his dodecasyllabic version ca. 1180–85, was more learned.[6] He made use of the earlier Continental versions and also revisited the principal Latin sources, but his text does not reflect the range of erudition we find in Thomas of Kent.[7] For Alexandre, as for Auberi and the anonymous Poitevin, their Latin sources' story of the hero's conception and birth would probably have read simply as dark magic, and the evidence of his bastardy would have been ethically and politically unacceptable. They attempted to paper over the unseemly aspects of Alexander's birth, though such attempts create bizarre effects. In what follows, I suggest that these effects are produced because Alexander's birth raises questions about the proper interpretation of portents and the ethical bounds that should be placed on scientific knowledge. Such questions were particularly troubling in the period of epistemic change that was the twelfth century, but although these authors might intuit them vaguely, they were unable to examine them in detail.

These questions become clearer in the *Roman de toute chevalerie*, which Thomas penned somewhere in England. The Anglo-Norman author, who invites other clerics to consult his sources and admire his adaptation (1324–42), makes better use of the library than his Continental peers, and he is willing to reproduce the story of Alexander's conception and birth from the principal Latin source they all share. As Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas has shown, Thomas's extensive engagement with Latin texts beyond simply the narratives of Alexander creates a romance that is encyclopedic in its scope and open to diverse discourses.[8] My interests here are not in the breadth of the romance, however, but in a specific moment early in the story when two learned practices that were each being subjected to a reconsideration in the twelfth century, paradoxography and astronomy, become intertwined.

The reconsideration of paradoxography and astronomy did not bear upon the credibility of these practices as a means to learning about the world and the people in it. Both the existence of marvels and the reliability of horoscopes had been subject to doubts since antiquity, but neither had yet been effectively discredited. However, the growing recognition that the world was governed by discernable natural laws broke the broad category of the marvel into two subcategories, marvels proper (brought about by natural processes) and miracles (the result of God's extraordinary intervention in natural processes). Miracles had to be understood as signs, but the difficulty lay in distinguishing them from marvels and discerning their meaning. The saints might intervene on behalf of individuals, offering clear marks of approval or disapproval, but miraculous portents might indicate some hidden sin already committed or some unknown disaster to come. Alexander's birth hovers in a zone of indistinction between natural marvels and supernatural miracles, and the meaning of its potential monstrousness is as ambiguous as the ethical import of the story of his life. In astrology, the association between natural processes and signs was quite the opposite from that of paradoxography, because astrology subjected natural processes to interpretation as signs and thus

derived its significance from the regularity, rather than the disruption, of those processes. What astrology leaves indistinct is not the existence of signs or their proper interpretation, but the scope of human action in response to them and the possibility of manipulating the understanding derived from them to alter destiny. In other words, like paradoxography, natural science also raises an ethical question. The intertwining of paradoxography and astrology at this moment in the story of Alexander casts the shadow of hermeneutic obscurity and ethical indeterminacy both backward and forward in the narrative. In this way, it draws attention to the ethical implications of advances in natural science in the twelfth century and makes of romance a prism that allows multiple divergent interpretations.

Alexander's birth in the Continental romances

The vernacular writers' principal source for the birth of Alexander was far removed in time from the events it recounted. It was an *Epitome* or summary, dating perhaps to the ninth century, of Julius Valerius's *Res gestae Alexandri Macedonis*, a fourth-century translation of a Greek romance written about a hundred years before and commonly attributed to Callisthenes.[9] The *Epitome* recounts how the last pharaoh of Egypt, the astrologer and magician Nectanebos, fathered Alexander by deceiving Olympias, wife of King Philip of Macedonia, into believing that Nectanebos was the god Ammon. When the time came for Olympias to deliver the child, Nectanebos once again intervened, casting horoscopes and compelling Olympias to defer the child's birth when those horoscopes portended terrible things. Once the signs were more favorable, Olympias delivered the child, but frightening portents attended the child's birth, and, although he was handsome, he had eyes of different colors. He murdered his biological father during an astrology lesson, mocking the sage for not foreseeing his own destiny, only to hear Nectanebos explain that he had indeed foreseen his murder by his own son—this, apparently, was the moment when Alexander learned of his true paternity.

The vernacular poets on the Continent attempt by diverse means to deflect attention from the embarrassment of this tale and domesticate its oddities.[10] Auberi cites the suggestion that Alexander's father could have been a magician only to dismiss it as malicious gossip, inadvertently making himself complicit in the transmission of the rumor (27–32). He recites the portents or *ensignes* (earthquakes, storms, and a partial eclipse) that accompany the hero's birth at some length, concluding with the brief comment that they indicate the birth of a powerful king (46–53), though the rumor that Alexander may be illegitimate survives to induce perhaps a faint doubt in readers. Moreover, the same inept verbosity that Auberi reveals in addressing the question of Alexander's legitimacy produces metaphorical excess in the *descriptio*, the conventional rhetorical catalogue of the hero's beauty. The *Epitome* only compares Alexander's hair to that of a lion (1.13), but Auberi creates a chain of animal comparisons:

> Saur ab lo peyl cum de peysson,
> tot cresp cum coma de leon;
> L'un uyl ab glauc cum de dracon
> et l'altre neyr cum de falcon. (60–63)
>
> [His hair was blond (and shone) like the scales of a fish; it curled like the mane of a lion. He had one green eye, like a dragon, and the other was black, like a falcon.]

This incoherent bestiary of a description anticipates the close relation that Alexander will entertain with fantastic beasts in all the vernacular romances and the program of manuscript illustrations that will develop to accompany them.[11] It may also refract, indistinctly, a curious moment in the *Epitome* that I will analyze in relation to the *Roman de toute chevalerie*: one of Nectanabus's horoscopes

announces that the child born in a particular moment will be only half man, and the horror of that possibility leads Nectanabus to retard the birth (1.12). If Auberi is responding to this detail in his source, he is redirecting it into the normative rhetorical practice of the trope, but readers who have not consulted the *Epitome* will not imagine anything as fantastical as a monstrous birth barely averted. They will see a descriptive exercise penned by an author who struggled to manage his similes. The subsequent lines, however, organize themselves into a tidier description: Alexander has bright skin, handsome features, curly blond hair (the author returns to the hair with no sign that he recalls describing it already a few lines before), a broad chest, narrow waist, and powerful arms (64–73). Thus while Auberi enhances the oddity of Alexander's animal-like appearance, he nonetheless contains it, like the portents, within a conventional context. Auberi's vehement denunciation of reports of the hero's illegitimacy has suppressed—or mostly suppressed—a darker core around which the same meteorological and corporeal signs might organize themselves to form a more disturbing portrait.

The oddities that characterize Auberi's text are absent from the decasyllabic version, which either wholly suppresses the problematic material or neutralizes it with a normative, pedantic exegesis. Alexandre de Paris, on the other hand, highlights certain of the problematic aspects, redirecting their significance. Such is his approach to the portents, which he features in his prologue. For the Parisian author, they indicate that Alexander will inspire the fear of men and beasts just as the signs themselves do (22–26, 62–94). Gone, however, is any mention of Alexander's appearance that might suggest a particular affinity with the animal realm. This is an Alexander whose relation to animals is one of subjection. In keeping with his vernacular predecessors, Alexandre de Paris reduces the liaison of Nectanabus and Olympias to a mean-spirited false report (166–84). However, the author does spare more lines for the childbirth: the astrologer planned the perfect moment for Alexander's birth, when the stars would have guaranteed the child a longer reign over a greater

empire, but Alexander entered the world just a little too late (185–94). The narrator casts no doubt on the reliability of astrology as a discipline, but Nectanabus comes across as an inept midwife whose interference is, ultimately, fatal.[12] The episode demonstrates the incapacity of humans—even the most adroit—to exploit the lessons of astrology for their own benefit or that of those they serve. Repeatedly, Alexandre de Paris's choices reduce hermeneutic indeterminacy and ethical ambiguities.

The Continental authors thus exemplify a range of approaches to the scandal of the hero's birth. Alexandre de Paris retains some of the problematic elements but frames or alters them so that boundaries are not transgressed (the boundary between human and animal) or transgressions are met with a devastating punishment (the line between the positive and the presumptuous use of human knowledge). Auberi, despite or perhaps because of his awkwardness, proves more intriguing. The oddness of this text may leave readers with the impression that behind it lies a more complex and interesting story. That story will be told by Thomas de Kent.

Alexander's birth in the *Roman de toute chevalerie* (a reconstruction)

Thomas de Kent used the same narrative sources as his predecessors, but also reproduced extensive material from other late antique texts to which the Continental translators had paid little attention. The influence of Solinus's *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (early third century CE), that imaginative rewriting of Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, opens up Thomas's romance to any number of marvels that no serious antique historiographer would have countenanced and makes it resemble the kinds of catalogues of marvels being compiled in the same period for the Plantagenets by Gerald of Wales (in the *Topographia hibernica*) and Gervase of Tilbury (in what would later be published as the *Otia imperialia*).[13] More indistinctly, the romance responds to contemporary debates about astrology, or at the very least it inspires the kinds of questions that twelfth-century thinkers were asking about the practice. Nonetheless, Thomas's greater reliance upon the *Epitome* also makes the Anglo-Norman

account read more like the romance that the unknown Greek author had written. There is magic, beauty, desire, disguise, and jealousy. The marvels do not univocally portend doom, and not all magic is black. Human erudition and art count among the wonders of this world.

Unfortunately, access to the "Anglo-Norman Alexander" is difficult. Though likely published before the version of Alexandre de Paris, it could not compete with it in popularity. For the opening episodes, only two manuscripts survive: *P* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 24364) and *D* (Durham Cathedral Library, MS C.IV.27B).[14] Paul Meyer, who published selections from P in his 1886 study of the Alexander legend, accused the scribe of hardly understanding what he was copying.[15] When Brian Foster reedited the *Roman de toute chevalerie* with the assistance of Ian Short for publication by the Anglo-Norman Text Society nearly a century later, they were less harsh in their characterization of *P*'s variants, attributing them to the desire to adapt the text to Continental language and tastes. They even noted that *P*'s readings were sometimes more comprehensible than *D*'s but understood that phenomenon "not so much [as] proof of genuineness as of a desire to smooth away obscurities." *P* would thus be "textually further removed than *D* from the original *Roman de toute chevalerie*." Above all, it appears to be the Continental language that disqualifies *P* from serving as the base for Foster and Short's critical text, a rationale governed by the series for which the book was destined.[16] However, Foster and Short did not triangulate the two versions to the *Epitome*. I will here examine that relationship in some detail, revealing that *P*'s text does indeed sometimes offer—or allow us to reconstruct—more logical and meaningful readings that reflect Thomas's close attention to the detail of the *Epitome*. *P*'s copyist must have been working from an exemplar that had maintained some *lectiones difficiliores* already eliminated from the exemplar that the Durham copyist employed. Hence at other moments, where *P* offers a perfectly comprehensible line or even a corrupt one that is absent from *D*, it is not always possible to know whether the line might

derive from Thomas's original text. In what follows, I shall cite principally from the Foster and Short edition but occasionally have recourse to either the Meyer edition or the manuscript itself.[17]

Thomas opens his romance with the notion of literary pleasure, which brightens and elevates short, unhappy lives on earth. "Un deduit ay choisi qe mult est delitus" [I have chosen a diversion that is very delightful], he writes (13), and then concludes the first *laisse*: "Ore put qui voet oir vers merveillus / d'Alisandre le roy. . . . / Hardiz estoit e conqueranz, sages e enginus" [Now anyone who wants may hear the marvelous story of Alexander the king. . . . He was valorous and eager to conquer, wise and cunning] (26–31). To foreground pleasure in this way as a reason to write and read in the vernacular is an innovation in this early period.[18] It is consonant, however, with the way Gervase of Tilbury frames his *Otia imperialia*, emphasizing the human mind's desire for novelties and variety.[19] Thomas's valorization of the pleasure of reading is inspired, not by fiction, but by natural history.

Thus the *Roman de toute chevalerie* opens not only with military prowess, but also with marvels, geography, learning, and an adroitness that can cross the line into deception (*engin)*. However, it is the learning or wisdom at the end of the first *laisse*, rather than the *engin*, that forms the transition to the second *laisse*, which adapts the overview of world geography with which ancient historiographers such as Orosius commonly commenced their texts. This broad display of learning is echoed in the third *laisse* by the introduction of Nectanabus, who was first among the learned nobles of antiquity (47), capable of conducting war by the magical arts alone: "Quant autre roy conquist a force d'esperon, / il se combaty par constanlacion; / ne voleit guerroier sanz artimage non" [When another king would conquer by force of arms, he would do battle by constellation and would only make war with magic] (50–52). The *laisse* describes in some detail Nectanabus's typical practice of fabricating small wax figures, "une conjunccion / en semblance d'omes par ymaginacioun" [an assemblage that takes on the semblance of men through the creation of images] (57–58), inscribed

with the names of those they represent. He can then foresee the outcome of their conflicts "par simulacion" [through simulation] (60). As these lines show, the *-on* rhyme allows Thomas to punctuate this *laisse* with a concatenation of abstract or learned terms, some newly adapted into the vernacular or adapted to new senses for the occasion: "simulacion," "constanlacion," "ymaginacioun."[20] The narrator's verbal dexterity makes him complicit with the Egyptian magician, conjuring words where none had been before and employing them in such a way that readers imagine they can grasp a meaning they have never learned, though there is a smoke-and-mirrors aspect to this literary practice because expressions such as "par simulacion" elude any precise definition. In fact, "constanlacion" and "ymaginacioun" eluded the copyist of P, who replaced them respectively with "estellacion" and "machinacion" (Meyer ed., 53, 59). With his "marvelous" forms of natural knowledge, then, Nectanabus remains troubling, but the sheer verbal exuberance of this *laisse* prevents him from appearing, on this first introduction, in an entirely negative light.

Forced to flee Egypt to save his life and live in Macedonia as an itinerant astrologer and mage, Nectanabus first glimpses the beautiful Olympias during her April birthday celebration, where each attracts the other's attention. When Olympias summons the mage to an interview at the palace, he draws her in with a display of his knowledge. Here Thomas follows the *Epitome* (1.4) but expands upon the characters' emotions. Nectanabus took "mult grant delit" [great pleasure] (190) in his proximity to Olympias, while his marvelous revelations render her preoccupied ("pensive") and make her laugh (187, 191). Among his revelations is the set of jeweled tablets, omitted from *D* but described in the *Epitome* and in *P,* in one of the passages where the Paris manuscript offers a richer and more lucid reading:

> En unes tables d'or une leçon li lit,
> les curs as .vii. planetes li at monstré e dit,

de quel colur eles sunt li prof escrit.

Pensive est mult la dame quant ces merveilles vit.

Les planetes del ciel es tables li enseigna,

Chascune en sa colur mult bien li devisa;

La colur del solail al crestal compara

La lune à l'adamant, *Martem* vermeil nota,

Mercure à verdor, *Venerem* assigna

a colur de saphir; raison de ceo mostra. (Meyer ed., 200–209)

[With a set of golden tablets he gave her a lesson, showing her the course of the seven planets and how their colors were written beside them. The lady was preoccupied to see these marvels. He taught her the planets of the heavens from the tablets and explained each one well, with its proper color; he compared the color of the sun to crystal, the moon to diamond, Mars to vermilion (i.e., cinnabar), Mercury to verdure, and to Venus he gave the color of sapphire; he explained the reason for this.][21]

The association of pleasure with the marvel insistently links the marvel to the mage's erudite manipulation of nature. This association may pose a challenge for readers today who understand the marvel as something *contrary* to nature, defining it objectively as something that has no rational explanation. Nectanabus's subsequent machinations will all be (at least, somewhat) explained. But in the Middle Ages, the marvel was primarily defined in terms of the response it elicited from the viewer. A marvel was something that surprised people, whether or not there was some rational explanation available for it, as Gervase of Tilbury makes clear when he describes the breadth of the

category of the marvel, from miraculous occurrences to the newly invented objects to previously unfamiliar sights.[22] In other words, Nectanabus's practices and his instruments are marvelous because Thomas represents them as marvels, and Olympias serves within the fiction as a proxy for the reader, responding with surprise and admiration to things she has never seen before. This temporary role, however, raises troubling questions, for Olympias is the object of Nectanabus's seduction. The relation between the marvelous mage and his privileged viewer will quickly become a sexual one, and it will produce Alexander. When Nectanabus's deception is finally revealed to Olympias, much later, the only response from her that the narrator records is "mult se merveille" [she marveled greatly] (508). But even in this early moment, before the prodigious events to come, the repeated use of the word "pensif," which can indicate mere preoccupation but also worry, to describe the queen's response opens the possibility that Nectanabus's seductive marvels might merit concern.

Nectanabus sends Olympias a dream in which she is visited and impregnated by the god Ammon. He then visits her himself, disguised with a ram's pelt and horns and a dragon's tail made of wax, which recalls the wax figures that he uses to see the future or send dreams. Like those creations, his disguise is a "conjunction" [assemblage] (261), a word that appears at the end of the first line of the new *laisse* and so establishes the rhyme for the *laisse* that will describe their sexual union. The rhyme replicates that of the *laisse* that demonstrated the Egyptian king at work, but this *laisse* ends with a moral judgment absent from the earlier description, and is likewise emphasized with rhyme words. Olympias reports her experience to Nectanabus the next morning "tuit si cum nen seust cele seducion. / Ele n'entendoit mie en li la traison" [entirely as if she knew nothing of the deceit; she did not expect treachery from him] (278–79).

Ultimately, it is at the moment of Olympias's labor when we see Nectanabus at work in the most terrifying way, for Thomas follows the *Epitome* with only small retouches. Nectanabus employs

his astrolabe to determine the fate of the child according to the conjunction of the stars (385). The astrolabe is a detail not mentioned in the *Epitome*; though the instrument can be traced to antiquity, it had probably not yet been invented in Alexander's day, and it was only introduced to Latin Europe in the eleventh century. (One wonders whether Thomas and his readers would have viewed the instrument as a novelty, the cutting edge of Arab science, or as a piece of recovered antiquity, its addition to the narrative a mark of Thomas's classical erudition.)[23] Nectanabus's first horoscope reveals that the moment is not propitious, for the child born under such signs will be a beggar and a coward. He tells Olympias to hold the child back and aids her with his arts. When she screams at new labor pains, he responds that the moment is even worse. According to Foster and Short's edition of manuscript *D*: "Car s'il ore nest, donc ert il, ceo devis, / la moité d'ome de chef e de vis" [for if he is born now, I say, he will be only half man in his head and his face] (394–95). The *Epitome* here reads "gallus et semivir erit qui nascetur" [the one born will be half man, half cock] (1.12), and *D*'s version captures the notion of the half-man, without specifying the other half but oddly specifying that it is his head that will be divided, inspired perhaps by the lore about Alexander's eyes. *P*'s version, on the other hand, would appear to make no sense: "Kar se il ore nest dunc ert cocher demis / L'autre meité ert home de la chere del vis." Neither Meyer nor Foster and Short transcribe these lines entirely correctly, but nor clearly did the copyist, for "cocher" (which Meyer transcribes "cocler") makes no sense.[24] Meyer, however, did in this instance consult the *Epitome*, which inspired his minimal and entirely convincing emendation to "cochez," a small rooster: "for if he is born now, he will be half rooster, and the other half will be a man in his flesh and in his face." For the birth scene, at least, we must take the readings of *P* seriously, and this suggests that we should not easily dismiss its additional line in what follows: Nectanabus aids Olympias in restraining the child, "e les assauz revenent de l'enfant qui fus vis, / *sa nature le volt e il fut volentis*" [the pains returned from the lively child; / *his nature demanded it and he was willing*] (Meyer ed., 415–16, my emphasis on the line

absent from *D*). If the child's nature seeks to be born in this moment, it is the nature of the half-man, fathered by a man disguised as a god and held back at birth, almost at the cost of the mother's life, by the mage-father.

When the continuing pains make Olympias fear for her life, Nectanabus, "dolenz et pensifs" (401), casts a third horoscope and sees the desired qualities: the child born in this hour will be a great conqueror. Olympias delivers Alexander to great rejoicing, but there is an earthquake, an eclipse, and a hurricane, as in the sources:

> Le roy Phelippes dit a Olimpias e jure
> qe alcune merveille ert de icele faiture;
> pur ly ert l'ouscurté, la pluie, la freidure,
> e folie ly semble qu'il tant vist ou dure.
> S'il vit, il feroyt mult male noreture.
> Ly mestres tint ses diz tuit a envoisure,
> e dit a la royne: "Tote en soiez seure,
> le temps est tuit tornez e partiz la laidure." (417–24)
>
> [King Philippe swore to Olympias that this creature was some marvel; on his account had come the darkness, the rain, and the cold, and it seemed a folly to allow him to live. If he lived, he would be an evil offspring. The master made light of his words and said to the queen: "Be reassured, the weather has changed now and the bad weather has ended."]

The marvel now is Alexander himself, this child whose birth is greeted by a disturbance in the course of nature and who has eyes of two different colors—the only unusual trait that Thomas

includes in his later description of the handsome adolescent (449–50). But Philippe's understanding of the prodigy—that he will prove an evil offspring—does not receive any satisfactory response, for Nectanabus chooses to make light of his claim rather than reason against it.

A new understanding of marvels

The concerns that Philippe expresses at the moment of Alexander's birth would resonate with a twelfth-century audience. It was still believed that monstrous races populated the edges of the habitable world. In Thomas's romance, Alexander's encounters with cynocephali (men with dog's heads, *laisse* 254), sciapods (men with one leg who use their foot to shade themselves from the sun, *laisse* 255), and so on, constitute a narrativized reworking of several antique sources that were still taken seriously, including Solinus's own reworking of Pliny's *Naturalis historia*. In fact, before embarking on his first description of such peoples, Thomas takes the time to enumerate his sources, thus lending the authority of ancient learning to his tale (*laisse* 243). Though he does not identify Pliny as a direct source, such marvelous races could still be understood in a Plinean way as examples of Nature's playfulness at the edges of the earth.[25] However, the Alexander material is above all a story of conquest, in which monsters pose a danger that must be neutralized by Alexander himself. The suggestion that the hero might also constitute a monster would undermine the all-important distinction between the hero and the beast, between conqueror and conquered.

But new divisions and categories had arisen in the twelfth century, characteristic of incipient scholastic method and its organization of knowledge. The notion of natural order, personified as Natura, became an intermediary between God's creative power and the birth of new individuals in a given species. This produced a new distinction between the monstrous races—understood to be born and live out their lives according to regular natural laws (however unfamiliar to Europeans)—and monstrous births in more ordinary human and animal communities. The former fit into the

category that Gervase of Tilbury and Gerald of Wales termed *mirabilia* ("wonders"), properly speaking: "nostre cognicioni non subiacent, etiam cum sunt naturalia" [our minds cannot grasp them, even though they are natural], while the latter, *miracula*, are somehow above nature ("praeter naturam" in Gervase's formulation) and can only be brought about by God's direct intervention in the course of nature.[26] Miracles must therefore be understood as signs. While the distinction between *mirabilia* and *miracula* was new, when it came to *mirabilia* writers frequently cited the old explanation of portents that Isidore of Seville had offered in his early medieval encyclopedia, the *Etymologies* (early seventh century):

> Portents and omens, monsters and prodigies are so named because they seem to portend and display, to show and predict future things. . . . Sometimes God wishes to signify what will come to pass through faults in things that are born, just as he does through dreams and oracles, by which he forewarns and signifies to people or individuals a disaster to come.[27]

Thus Guibert of Nogent cited the birth of conjoined twins among other diverse portents that preceded the communal revolt at Laon in 1115.[28] According to this new distinction, a monstrous child born to Olympias would foretell some great disaster.

Alternatively, it might make manifest some great sin. This was the other explanation of the monstrous birth, one given particular currency in the Norman court (for which Thomas may have destined his romance) by Gerald of Wales, who was in this very period reporting on monstrous humans in a region Alexander never visited: Ireland. At the end of the catalogue of *mirabilia* that occupies the first half of his second book of the *Topographia*, before transitioning to the *miracula* worked by the saints that will occupy the second half, he discusses intercourse between humans and animals or between different species of animals that produces monstrous offspring. Thus a mute

child from the neighborhood of Wicklow who has a bald head, protuberant eyes, no nose, and limbs that resemble an ox and a similar person from the mountains of Glendalough must have been born from the union of a man and a cow. "Are they even men?" Gerald asks of these individuals, concluding inconclusively, "timenda est naturae vindicta" [the revenges of Nature must be feared].[29] He does not ask whether the ox-men constitute marvels (hence, not signs) or miracles (signs). By placing them at the end of his catalogue of marvels, he implies that they belong in that category. However, they also immediately precede the miracles, and this vengeful Nature rather resembles the Irish saints, whose miracles mostly serve the purpose of a "retributive justice, descending from above, which protected the weak and enforced otherwise non-enforceable standards," as Robert Bartlett has observed.[30] The monstrous births hover between the category of marvel and that of miracle, and so their status as signs remains unclear.

The indeterminacy is similar with Alexander's birth in the *Roman de toute chevalerie*. The event is no disaster for Olympias and Philippe, but it will be for Nectanabus and for all the kings and peoples he will eventually subdue. In this way, Alexander's portentous birth suggests some ambivalence in the assessment of Alexander's deeds, an ambivalence also visible in Alexandre de Paris's version of the story. The comparison to Gerald's *Topographia* also opens the possibility of a more original interpretation of the near-portent as a sign of sin: adultery, perhaps—it would be enough—but also, more suggestively, the manipulation of natural laws by Nectanabus. There is a disturbing symmetry between the species-crossing disguises that Nectanabus employs to seduce Olympias and the near-miss that the child experiences, being almost born a chimera. Moreover, that Nectanabus is principally an astrologer and that he forestalls the monstrous result by means of that art links the problem of the marvel to the problem of astrology.

The problem of astrology

Like paradoxography, astrology enjoyed the status of a credible field of study in the Middle Ages, but the attitude of twelfth-century scholars was ambivalent. The problem of astrology was a tension—not new, but newly heightened—between discomfort with the claim that the motions of the planets and stars could be precisely linked to human events and a growing awareness that astrological calculations constituted an exacting science and that the connection between the powers of the superlunary world and events in the sublunary world could be explained in terms of natural science. There was widespread ambivalence about the perceived consequences of this natural science.

This ambivalence can be seen in Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon* (ca. 1127).[31] Hugh's introduction to the study of the arts takes various views of astrology. In the first book, he acknowledges that his description of the world comes from the astrologers (*mathematici*) and claims that things exist in three different ways: eternally, perpetually, or temporally (1.6). Perpetual existence is proper to the superlunary world, which is nature, defined in a later chapter as the "artificer fire coming forth from certain power to beget sensible objects" (1.10). Temporal existence belongs to the sublunary world, which is populated by the acts of nature (1.6, 7). This would at least partially justify the claims of astronomers that the motions of the stars govern events on earth, and it takes its basis in a cosmology or a physics. However, in book 2, Hugh confines astronomy by describing it as part of the *quadrivium*, and, ignoring recent writing on astronomy or astrology, draws on Isidore's discussion of astrology, which divides it into the natural and the superstitious (3.24, 3.27). Natural astrology relates to health and illness, storm and calm, etcetera, while the superstitious relates to chance events or events brought about by the exercise of human free will (2.10). Astrology's third appearance in the *Didascalicon* inspires a condemnation that makes no allowance for naturalistic explanation or a distinction between a natural and a superstitious astrology: this is a

seemingly authentic, but possibly unintegrated, chapter on magic, largely calqued from Isidore, that appears at the end of the final book in a particular group of manuscripts.[32] Here we encounter a number of practices that should be familiar from the story of Nectanabus: soothsaying, horoscopy, sorcery, and the performance of illusions. All are "omnis iniquitatis et malitiae magistra, de vero mentiens, et veraciter laedens animos" [the mistress of every form of iniquity and cunning, lying about the truth and truly harming minds] (6.15). Max Lejbowicz has discovered similar incoherencies in the work of Hugh's younger contemporary in Toledo, the translator and writer Dominicus Gundissalinus.[33] What appears to underlie such vacillation is a long-standing discomfort with the way astrology seemed to exceed the bounds of how human reason should be employed and the challenge it poses to ethics.[34]

In this period, it is verse narrative that allows writers most fully to explore astrology's ethical challenges, as Bernard Silvester demonstrates in the *Mathematicus* (1140s).[35] Here, an astrologer has predicted that the child a woman would bear would be distinguished in all ways and become the king of Rome, but he would also kill his father. The mother is unable to carry out the father's demand that the infant be put to death. Instead, she sends the child, Patricida, away to be raised in ignorance of his true parents. The young man becomes king. The mother reveals his identity to the father, who reveals all to the son and forgives him in advance for the act he must commit. The son resolves to commit suicide rather than kill his father, but must demand permission from the people to kill himself, and an unresolved debate ensues. Neither the validity of the astrologer's predictions nor the radical, tragic determinism they imply are called into question; only when Patricida declares his intention to render the message of the stars invalid does the text suggest that the stars may be unreliable. But there are reasons to wonder how successful Patricida will be in disproving the stars—might not the grief caused by Patricida's suicide kill his father after all? Might not Patricida's father, seeing the direction that events are taking, attempt to stave them off by killing himself? The

emphasis thus falls, not on the status of astrology, but on the actions that individuals choose to undertake when faced by certain or uncertain or imperfect knowledge of their destiny.[36] Astrology may provide the grand outlines, but not the messy detail, and in attempting to thwart an announced event one may in fact precipitate it.

Thus, though the twelfth-century texts on astrology are mined by internal contradictions or obscurities, it is possible to conclude that, as the discipline was conceived in the period, the quandary astrology introduces into human life is not what the signs are or how to read them—that is a scientific discipline—but what to do with the knowledge they supply and what the ethical and indeed spiritual implications of that action are. The forms of natural understanding produce, rather than resolve, questions. In his vernacular narrative of the *Roman de toute chevalerie*, Thomas allows these problems to emerge by following the *Epitome*'s version of Alexander's birth. Nectanabus does indeed intervene to change the fate of the child; his art makes possible Alexander the Great. Yet at the same time Nectanabus proves powerless in the face of the stars, for some horoscope—the one he cast at Alexander's birth, or perhaps another—has told him that the boy would murder him. This knowledge does not stop him from asking a question after Alexander has pushed him into the ditch:

> Nectanabus li dit: "Pur quei m'as ceo fet, sire?"
> Alisandre ly respont: "Tu sies le mond descrire,
> e juger bien e mal de chascune matire.
> Qe ne sous tu deviner qui te devereit occire?
> Les autres devinas, de tey ne sous rien dire.
> Ore gis illuec envers; tu n'as mester de mire.
> Par les esteilles poez tes aventures dire.
> M'est avis, endreit de tey astronomie enpire!

L'em deit astronome blamer e despire
qui ne veit ses aventures e tuz les autres mire."
Del dit ad li mestres dolur e grant ire.

Ceo dit Nectanabus el fossé ou gisoit:
"Jeo savoye trop bien qe mon fiz m'oceroit." (488–500)

[Nectanabus said to him: "Why have you done this to me, lord?" Alexander responded to him: "You know how to explain the world, and make judgments about the goodness or the evil of each thing. Now you lie there prostrate; a doctor will do you no good. You can tell your destiny by the stars. It seems to me that with you astronomy is degraded!
The astronomer should be blamed and despised who can see the future of others but not his own." His words pained and grieved the master. Nectanabus said this in the ditch where he lay: "I knew perfectly well that my son would kill me."]

Nectanabus knows that Alexander has murdered him because the stars have foreordained it, so his question of "why" is some version of "what was your individual motivation for exercising what you believed to be your free will?" Alexander's response, "because I wanted to prove that you can't predict everything," is a model of dramatic irony, and it prompts Nectanabus to reveal for the first time all he has done—that is, the truth of Alexander's birth, which even his mother had not known. By showing how this episode reworks the Aesopian fable of the philosopher who falls in a pit because he is gazing at the stars, Laurence Harf-Lancner has demonstrated that the Alexander romances reverse the ordinary moral of a well-known story.[37] Rather than demonstrating the incompatibility between advanced learning and the ability to live in the world, as the fable does,

Nectanabus's death affirms the superiority of his natural science, while still exacting punishment for his presumption (386). In this way, it reflects ethical concerns about the uses of astrology, but it does not offer an unambiguous response, for it demonstrates the sin and ignorance of the character, Alexander, who serves as the mouthpiece for a trite condemnation of astrology. At the same time, the episode demonstrates the impossibility of resisting fate and the mechanisms of the natural order, either through knowledge of it (Nectanabus) or ignorance (Alexander, unlike Patricida, was never warned that he would murder his father). The world of regular natural processes is a ruthlessly deterministic one in which it does not matter whether or not one can read the signs.

And the young Alexander has proven, with the first voluntary act the narrative ascribes to him, that he may well be the "male noriture" that Philippe feared. The crime, if not the man, is monstrous. Now, perhaps, readers are reminded of the half-man he might have been. The reminder is heightened by the position of the episode of Nectanabus's death in the narrative (*laisses* 22–24), where it is framed by the arrival of the hybrid, man-eating steed Bucephalus in Philippe's stables (laisse 21) and the animal's taming by Alexander (*laisses* 25–26). The certainty of the signs of astronomy contrasts to the uncertainty of the signs in a paradoxography that the *Roman de toute chevalerie* will offer overtly as Alexander travels east and north and south to meet the monstrous races, and that the *Roman* has already commenced elliptically with Alexander's near-birth as a half-man and his adoption of a chimera. But Alexander's responsibility for his murderous behavior, and hence the degree to which his ethical or spiritual being might reflect the savagery of the monsters—that he might himself be one—is reduced by the determinism of the horoscope. Thus the kind of ethical judgment evoked by paradoxography is disabled by the intellectual, scientific justification for astrology, even as the text's identification of astrology with a dissembling seducer has called into question (far more effectively than Alexander's words) the ethical implications of attempting to benefit from astronomy's own, unambiguous—and natural—system of signs. In the intellectual

excitement of the twelfth-century renaissance, in the reaffirmation of the world's comprehensibility and of human learning that will spark scholasticism and all that follows it, the monstrous birth of Alexander the Great, recited for the first time in the new languages of Europe, offers matter for reflection about the cost of knowledge.

Notes

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[1] Abelard, *Ad amicum suum consolatoria epistola*, ed. J. T. Mickle in "Abelard's Letter of Consolation to a Friend," *Mediaeval Studies* 12 (1950): 175–211, at 183.

[2] Thomas de Kent, *The Anglo-Norman Alexander*, ed. Brian Foster with the assistance of Ian Short, 2 vols. (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1976–77); *Le Roman d'Alexandre ou le Roman de toute chevalerie*, trans., introduction, and notes by Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas and Laurence Harf-Lancner, ed. Brian Foster and Ian Short (Paris: Champion, 2003); "Extraits [du *Roman de toute chevalerie*] d'après le MS de Paris," in *Alexandre le Grand dans la littérature française du Moyen Âge*, ed. Paul Meyer, 2 vols. (Paris, 1886), 1:177–235, 1:340–42, 2:273–99. I cite these medieval romances in the text by line numbers. All translations are my own.

[3] Merlin's figure as worker of wonders and its importance for the romance genre has been persuasively described by Karen Sullivan, *The Danger of Romance: Truth, Fantasy, and Arthurian Fictions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 60–105, in a chapter that resonates with the present article.

[4] Auberi de Besançon, "Alberics Alexanderfragment. Neuausgabe und Kommentar," ed. Ulrich Mölk and Günter Holtus, *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 115 (1999): 582–625. Citations in the text are to line numbers. François Zufferey has recently reaffirmed Mölk and Holtus's conclusions about the origin and language of the author while noting that his given name in Francoprovençal would

have been "Auberi," see "Perspectives nouvelles sur l'Alexandre d'Auberi de Besançon," *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 123 (2007): 385–418.

[5] *L'Alexandre décasyllabique*, ed. Alfred Foulet, in *The Medieval French Roman d'Alexandre*, ed. Edward C. Armstrong et al., 7 vols, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1937–76), 3:61–100.

[6] Alexandre de Paris, *Le Roman d'Alexandre*, ed. Edward C. Armstrong et al., in *The Medieval French Roman d'Alexandre*, vols. 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7; in-text citations are to line numbers.

[7] Compare Douglas Kelly, "Alexander's *Clergie*," in *The Medieval French Alexander*, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 39–55; and Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas, *Les Romans d'Alexandre: Aux frontières de l'épique et du romanesque* (Paris: Champion, 1998), 303–8. Alexandre de Paris is probably not the Alexandre who penned the *Roman d'Athis et Procelias* and there acknowledges his lack of *clergie*. See *Li Romans d'Athis et Procelias*, ed. Marie-Madeleine Castellani (Paris: Champion, 2006), lines 9–11, as well as Castellani's introductory comments pp. 76–89.

[8] See Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas, "La Description du monde dans le *Roman de toute chevalerie* de Thomas de Kent," *Bien dire et bien aprandre* 12 (1993): 191–206. My views here diverge from those of Kelly ("Alexander's *Clergie*"), who treats the versions of Alexandre de Paris and Thomas de Kent in parallel and draws his conclusions about both.

[9] *Julii Valerii Epitome*, ed. Julius Zacher (Halle, Ger., 1867). Citations of the *Epitome* are to book and paragraph numbers.

[10] See Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas, "Nectabanus et la singularité d'Alexandre dans les *Romans d'Alexandre* français," in *Alexandre le Grand dans les littératures occidentales et proche-orientales: Actes du colloque de Paris, 27–29 novembre 1999*, ed. Laurence Harf-Lancner, Claire Kappler, and François Suard (Nanterre, Fr.: Université de Paris X-Nanterre, 1999), 303–19.

[11] Zufferey observes that the fish comparison is unique in medieval verse (415). On Alexander's relation to beasts, see Mark Cruse, "Du livre-monde au héros-animal: Enluminer le non humain dans un manuscrit du *Roman d'Alexandre* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 264)," in *Alexandre le Grand à la lumière des manuscrits et des premiers imprimés en Europe (XII^e—XVI^e siècle)*, ed. Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas (Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols, 2015), 317–33.

[12] See Gaullier-Bougassas, *Les Romans d'Alexandre*, 364–66.

[13] Solinus, *Collectanea rerum mirabilium*, ed. Theodor Momsen (Berlin, 1895); Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historiae libri xxxvii*, ed. L. von Jan, 5 vols. (Leipzig, 1854–60); Gerald of Wales, *Topographia Hibernica*, vol. 5 of *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. James F. Dimrock (London, 1867), 3–204; Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia imperialia*, ed. and trans. S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). Gervase's *Otia imperialia* was not completed until about 1215 and dedicated to the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto IV, but Gervase had begun the compilation in the 1270s with the intention of presenting it to Henry Young King; see the general preface, 14.

[14] A third manuscript of the *Roman de toute chevalerie*, Cambridge, Trinity College O.9.34, lacks this portion of the text.

[15] Meyer, *Alexandre le Grand dans la littérature française*, 2:278–80.

[16] Foster and Short, *Anglo-Norman Alexander*, 2:19, 23.

[17] Scholarship on this passage is rare, but see Gaullier-Bougassas, *Les Romans d'Alexandre*, 349–61, an interpretation based on the Foster and Short critical text.

[18] see Gaullier-Bougassas and Harf Lancner, eds., *Roman d'Alexandre ou le Roman de toute chevalerie*, xxi–xxii.

[19] See Gervase, *Otia imperialia*, general preface (12) and preface to bk. 3 (558).

[20] See Gaullier-Bougassas and Harf-Lancner, *Le Roman d'Alexandre*, p. 9 n. 1.

[21] "Verdor," a correct transcription from the manuscript, is out of place in this list of mineral comparisons; might the original line have referred to some stone whose color was variable, i.e., "vair" in the medieval sense? Or might the word have been "mercur," as in the metal mercury, i.e., quicksilver?

[22] Gervase, *Otia imperialia*, preface to bk. 3 (558). See the discussion by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 21–24.

[23] For the early history of the astrolabe, see O. Neugebauer, "The Early History of the Astrolabe: Studies in Ancient Astronomy IX," *Isis* 40, no. 3 (1949): 240–56.

[24] Compare the manuscript, fol. 3r, to Meyer edition, lines 411–12 and the variants from *P* given in the Foster and Short edition, vol. 1, p. 260.

[25] Pliny, *Naturalis historiae libri xxxvii*, 7.3.32.

[26] For this distinction, see Gervase, *Otia imperialia*, preface to bk. 3 (558); and Gerald, *Topographia Hibernica*, preface to bk. 2 (74); as well as the discussions by Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146–1223* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 104–17; and Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 48–66.

[27] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), 11.3.2, 4.

[28] Guibert of Nogent, *Autobiographie*, ed. and trans. Edmond-René Labande (Paris: Belles lettres, 1981), 3.11.

[29] Gerald of Wales, *Topographia Hibernica*, 2.21 (108–9); and for refs. in bk. 2 to the *mirabilia*, the *miracula*, and monstrous offspring, see, respectively, chaps. 1–27, chaps. 28–55, and chaps. 21–24.

[30] Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, 122.

[31] Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon de studio legendi*, ed. Charles Henry Buttimer (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1939); *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to*

the Arts, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). Further citations are to book and chapter numbers.

[32] Isidore, *Etymologiarum*, 8.5; Taylor, trans., *Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor*, 152. This chapter is Taylor's appendix B and Buttimer's 6.15 in *Didascalicon de studio legendi*.

[33] Max Lejbowicz, "Le Choc des traductions arabo-latines du XII[e] siècle et ses consequences dans la spécialisation sémantique d'*astrologia* et d'*astronomia*: Dominicus Gundissalinus et la *sciencia iudicandi*," in *Transfert de vocabulaire dans les sciences*, ed. M. Groult, P. Louis, and J. Roger (Paris: CNRS, 1988), 213–76.

[34] Max Lejbowicz, "Les Antécédents de la distinction isidorienne: *Astrologia/astronomia*," in *Observer, lire, écrire le ciel au Moyen Âge: Actes du colloque d'Orléans 22–23 avril 1989*, ed. Bernard Ribémont, Sapience (Paris: Klincksieck, 1991), 173–211; Lejbowicz, "Postérité médiévale de la distinction isidorienne *astrologia/astronomia*: Bède le Vénérable et le vocabulaire de la chronométrie," *Documents pour l'histoire du vocabulaire scientifique* 7 (1985): 1–41.

[35] Bernardus Silvestris, *Poetic Works*, ed. and trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 183–245.

[36] Here my reading is consonant with that of Robert R. Edwards, "Poetic Invention and the Medieval *Causae,*" *Mediaeval Studies* 55 (1993): 183–217, at 195.

[37] Laurence Harf-Lancner, "Les Romans d'Alexandre et la fable de l'astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits," in *Plaist vos oïr boneançon vallant? Mélanges offerts à François Suard*, ed. Dominique Boutet et al. (Villeneuve d'Ascq, Fr.: Université Charles de Gaulle-Lille 3, 1999), 374–86.